

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

July 19, 2022

The Honorable Raul Grijalva
Chairman
Committee on Natural Resources
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Grijalva:

We are writing to urge immediate action to move through regular order the bipartisan Save Our Sequoias (SOS) Act, which is cosponsored by more than 40 bipartisan Members of Congress and supported by more than 100 organizations.¹ Last week, the catastrophic Washburn Fire threatened the awe-inspiring and magnificent Mariposa Grove in Yosemite National Park, which holds over 500 Giant Sequoia trees, including the iconic Grizzly Giant.² This grove once inspired President Abraham Lincoln, in the midst of the Civil War, to recognize the unique and irreplaceable value of Giant Sequoias and set them aside for future generations to enjoy.³ Decades later, President Theodore Roosevelt called the Mariposa Grove “a temple greater than any human architect could by any possibility build,” and expanded protections for Giant Sequoias.⁴ Today, the Mariposa Grove serves as a poignant reminder that these 3,000-year-old temples are facing historically unprecedented peril and that proactive management is our best chance to save our sequoias.

We introduced the bipartisan SOS Act after months of close collaboration with federal, state, Tribal, and local land managers, as well as forestry, environmental, and other community stakeholders. We traveled to the groves themselves to see firsthand the devastation previous fires have had on the Giant Sequoias, and the groves that are still in danger of imminent destruction. The consensus that emerged from those conversations was clear: land managers need emergency tools and resources *now* to save our sequoias. This is perhaps best summed up by Dr. Christy Brigham, the Chief of Resources Management and Science at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, who stated: “Government is slow, and wildfire is fast. We need a way to speed up government if we want to protect these trees we love so much.”⁵

Our legislation would do exactly that by improving interagency coordination, utilizing robust scientific analysis to triage high priority Giant Sequoia groves, expediting forest restoration projects by codifying and streamlining existing emergency procedures, and providing substantial new tools and resources to land managers. Each component of this carefully crafted bill not only received extensive feedback from stakeholders, but also is critical to comprehensively addressing this crisis. The legislation reflects the clear scientific consensus that

¹ H.R. 8168, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/8168?r=1&s=1>.

² InciWeb, “Washburn Fire,” <https://inciweb.nwcg.gov/incident/map/8209/0/131450>. Accessed on July 13, 2022.

³ Glass, Andrew, “President Lincoln creates Yosemite Park, June 30, 1864,” Politico, June 30, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/president-lincoln-creates-yosemite-park-june-30-1864-224818>.

⁴ National Park Service, “Roosevelt, Muir, and the Grace of Place,” August 26, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/yose/learn/historyculture/roosevelt-muir-and-the-grace-of-place.htm>.

⁵ Warszawski, Marek, “California’s giant sequoias are being destroyed by wildfires. This bill can save them,” The Fresno Bee, June 27, 2022, <https://www.fresnobee.com/opinion/opn-columns-blogs/marek-warsawski/article262862988.html>.

accelerating ecologically-sound forest management treatments, including thinning and prescribed burning, are critical to saving our sequoias.⁶ The results speak for themselves; a recent Washburn Fire Incident update issued by the National Park Service, California Interagency Incident Management Team 13, and U.S. Forest Service stated:

For many years there has been a concerted effort to reduce the large amounts of trees (both living and dead) in certain areas within Yosemite National Park. This never-ending task involves thinning trees with a variety of masticating and chipping equipment, chainsaws and through the use of low intensity ground fire when conditions permit. The high severity fire activity we are currently experiencing on the Washburn Fire is the result of fire being fueled by a large forested area with an extremely concentrated biomass. So, who or what benefits from the reduction of the biomass? If you have a chance to visit the Mariposa Grove after the fire you will see the results of a low intensity fire burning in an area where the biomass has already been reduced. The result is that the Mariposa Grove survived, remains in good health and a healthier habitat has been created for local flora and fauna.⁷

Garrett Dickman, a biologist in Yosemite National Park, also credited previous fuels reduction in the Mariposa Grove as crucial to protecting the grove's Giant Sequoias. He recently stated, "The really obvious takeaway is we've been preparing for this fire for 50 years. And that preparation is saving these trees. We haven't had to wrap trees or really put firefighters at tremendous risk. They've been able to engage safely because those fuel reduction treatments have proven to be so effective."⁸ Unfortunately, the vast majority of Giant Sequoia groves have not received similar treatments and remain extremely vulnerable to high-severity wildfires, insects, and drought.

We need to make sure that the pace and scale of hazardous fuels reduction treatments is accelerated across all the Giant Sequoia groves. Since the Washburn Fire began, firefighters have been using emergency authorities to clear hazardous fuels in and around the groves and take urgent action to protect Giant Sequoias.⁹ But we cannot just manage our Giant Sequoias when the sky is red with smoke and flames; we must proactively treat these groves *before* fires ignite. The SOS Act would allow land managers to proactively use the *same* emergency authorities that are being deployed right now to protect Giant Sequoias from fire and prevent high-intensity fires from occurring in the first place. In the past two years, catastrophic wildfires have killed up to one-fifth of the world's Giant Sequoias. The intensity and frequency of these wildfires are being exacerbated by worsening drought conditions and extreme heat, and the wildfires themselves are making things worse by increasing global emissions. If we do not take urgent action now, we could lose this entire species in the next 25 years.¹⁰

⁶ Shive, et al., "Ancient trees and modern wildfires: Declining resilience to wildfire in the highly fire-adapted giant sequoia," *Forest Ecology and Management* 511, February 2022.

⁷ National Park Service, California Interagency Incident Management Team 13, U.S. Forest Service, "Washburn Fire Incident Update," July 13, 2022.

⁸ Harrell, Ashley, "Yosemite's Mariposa Grove will survive Washburn Fire, says park's forest ecologist," SF Gate, July 11, 2022, <https://www.sfgate.com/california-wildfires/article/mariposa-grove-will-survive-fire-17298114.php>.

⁹ Davis, Wynne, "Wildfire near Yosemite National Park threatens its largest grove of sequoia trees," NPR, July 11, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/11/1110879376/yosemite-washburn-fire-mariposa-grove-sequoias>.

¹⁰ Mariposa County Resource Conservation District, "Last of the Monarchs," <https://vimeo.com/685657372/c526d9ece1>.

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We do not have a moment to waste and can no longer wait until the fire starts to take action. Therefore, we are requesting that the Committee on Natural Resources immediately hold a hearing and markup on the SOS Act. Failing to act while our Giant Sequoias remain under threat is not an acceptable option. We must act now so we are not the generation that kills these 3,000-year-old trees.

Sincerely,



Kevin McCarthy
House Republican Leader



Scott Peters
Member of Congress



Bruce Westerman
Member of Congress



Jim Costa
Member of Congress



David G. Valadao
Member of Congress



Jimmy Panetta
Member of Congress



Tom McClintock
Member of Congress